

Complementizer Choice in Selected Eastern  
Bantu Languages

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1. Introduction

The linguistic unity of the Bantu language group is an accepted fact among linguists. Those concerned with the Eastern Bantu languages in particular often find that phenomena--on the phonological, morphological or syntactic levels--which they have discovered to be present in the grammar of one language are paralleled by identical phenomena in other Bantu languages spoken hundreds of miles away. Yet, at the same time, we are often startled to find totally dissimilar behavior in languages which are close neighbors. The majority of the evidence establishing the unity of the Bantu languages falls within the realms of phonology and morphology. Comparison of the phonological and morphological properties of many Bantu languages has led to a fair understanding of the essential phonological and morphological characteristics which must have been present in the proto-language. On the syntactic level, however, the work has barely begun. Although Bantuists recognize some syntactic patterns as 'typical' of Bantu, intensive investigations into the extent to which syntactic phenomena in various Bantu languages parallel or differ from each other are rare. Yet it is precisely this type of investigation which is crucial to our understanding of Bantu syntax.

This type of full scale, intensive investigation is a massive undertaking, which I have barely begun. Nonetheless, I have embarked on a preliminary course to discover what the investigation of one small facet of syntax in several geographically separated Eastern Bantu languages can tell us about the types of results we might obtain if we attempt a systematic investigation of comparative Bantu syntax. These results must, of course, be tested against a wider range of Bantu languages before they can be accepted as valid. In addition, these results must eventually be compared with grammatical descriptions of English and other non-Niger-Congo languages, because such comparisons with clearly unrelated languages enable us to discover the extent to which any conclusions we have reached may be attributed to language relatedness and the extent to which they may reflect language universals.

2. The Problem

In this paper, I have chosen to investigate the verb phrase complementation systems of several Eastern Bantu languages. I shall show how such systems may be related and contrasted, and shall argue that several syntactic-semantic concepts are crucial to an understanding of the complementation systems of these languages.



I have not looked at all, or even most, of the Eastern Bantu languages, but I have examined written materials--grammars and texts--from a number of geographically diverse languages and attempted to arrive at some valid generalizations. In this paper I shall take my examples from two languages: Kamba (Kenya) as described in *Notes on the Kamba Language* by Gerhard Lindblom (1925); *A Kamba Grammar* by E. M. F. (1952); and *Practical Introduction to Kamba* by W. H. Whiteley and M. G. Muli (1962); and from Chewa (Malawi) as described in *A Grammar of Chichewa* by Mark Hanna Watkins (1937). These languages are chosen not so much because they are typical in all respects in their complementation systems as because the ways in which they vary seem to evidence the range of complementation variation which is found. For both of these languages I have attempted to correlate the stated properties of their grammars with the properties exhibited in texts or connected examples so as to reduce the possibility of errors due to the analysts' native languages.

In the investigation of 'common' (i.e. Indo-European) languages, it has often been found that three verbal forms tend to occur differentially in verb phrase complement constructions: Indicatives, Subjunctives, and Infinitives. Verbal forms which are given these labels are also found in most, if not all, of the Bantu languages. They exhibit strong morphological similarity: the indicative form of the verb usually ends in an *-a*, the subjunctive ends in an *-e* (*-ē*), and the infinitive is indicated by a prefixed *ku-* (or variants). These verbal forms are generally found in complement clauses as well as in other syntactic constructions. As there is a great deal of morphological stability of these affixes in the Bantu languages, it is natural to ask whether they are also functionally stable, that is whether the principles governing their appearance in certain syntactic frames--in this case the complement construction--are identical, or close to identical, in all of the Bantu languages.

In each of the Bantu languages I have examined, there are both similarities and differences in the ways in which the different verbal forms are used in the complement construction. The tendency is for the three forms to be used under different circumstances, although in certain cases the governing criteria are such that the verbal forms will contrast. In such circumstances they generally will have different interpretations. The remainder of the paper will be devoted to an exposition of the major morphological devices employed as complementizers in the two object languages, and a discussion of the differences which these complementizers indicate.

### 3. Preliminary comparison

Both Chewa and Kamba are typical of the Bantu languages I have examined in that all three verbal forms appear in their complement clauses:

#### 1. Infinitives

##### a. Chewa

- i. *ḡámíco·ni ḡádáyámhá kup<sup>h</sup>unzitsa ḡa·nth<sup>u</sup>.*  
'the missionaries began to teach the people.'
- ii. *maḡá tikátémé bá·ngó kudzaruké vitε·tε*  
'Tomorrow we must go and cut reed(s) (with which)  
to make harvesting baskets'

- b. Kamba
- i. andũ onthe me:tata kũlika kiwanzani makone mũvĩla.  
'all the people were trying to get into the stadium to see the game.'
  - ii. yuyu nũkwĩmanyĩsya kũtwaĩthya.  
'now he is learning to drive.'

## 2. Subjunctives

### a. Chewa

- i. nifuná kutí nívé muno m bwaró mwánu.  
'I wish that I may hear here in your court.'
- ii. mlékēni tcámmandja akwatiwé ku kasúngu.  
'let Chammanja be married at Kasungu.'

### b. Kamba

- i. nĩngũthi ngathooe mbũli.  
'I'm going to buy a goat.'
- ii. wĩ:enda nambĩlĩlye wĩa indĩĩ.  
'when do you want me to start work.'

## 3. Indicatives

### a. Chewa

- i. nio'pá kutí angazidáná ná azungu ßáthũ.  
'I fear that he and our Europeans will hate each other.'
- ii. wapeza wazyókásó ti'yí.  
'he found that he had again turned into a tiyi (bird).'

### b. Kamba

- i. aisye kana nũkũka ũmũnthi.  
'he said that he is coming tomorrow.'
- ii. anambĩie akandũmĩa ivuku.  
'he told me he would send me the book.'

Yet these two languages do not always select the same verbal form in the same complementation context; and there are morphological differences, as well as similarities, in the construction of complement clauses in each language.

Some complement clauses may be introduced by a special word. In Chewa, this introducer, kutí, may introduce both indicative and subjunctive complements:

4. a. ßámico'ni ßadáuza ßanthũ kutí kugulĩtsana ßanthũ ko'ipa.  
'the missionaries told the people that it is bad for people to sell each other.'
- b. nifúna kutí musungá.né nikafa iné.  
'I hope that you protect each other (marry) when I am dead.'

Kamba has two introducers, kana and atĩ, which appear to be in free



variation (although *kana* appears more frequently), these words only introduce complements with indicative verbs:

5. a. manaisye atí maka:thi Masa:kũ.  
'they said that they would go to Machakos.'
- b. mwana wa:kwa e:ísilya kana e:ana...  
'my child thinks that when he grows up...'

Chewa infinitives may have either the subjunctive or the indicative suffix, as is shown by (1a) above; while Kamba infinitives are invariably indicative, as is shown in (1b). Thus, although there are obvious morphological similarities in the complementation systems of these two languages, there are also rather clear points of difference. What remains to be shown is whether these variations are due to essential differences in the syntactic/semantic structures of complementation in these two languages; or are two alternate variations on the same essential organization. The answers to this question can only be reached through the detailed examination of complementation in each language, and the careful comparison of the results of these examinations.

#### 4. Chewa complementation patterns

Chewa has six morphologically distinct complementation patterns:

6. a. Bare Indicative
- b. *kutí* Indicative
- c. Bare Subjunctive
- d. *kutí* Subjunctive
- e. Indicative Infinitive
- f. Subjunctive Infinitive.

Bare indicative complements, as exemplified by

7. a. papɛza wawuma wó·sɛ.  
'they (she) found that it had all dried up.'
- b. títsoḡolɛ takátɛmá sú·ḡwí.  
'we must cut bamboo.'

are most uncommon along the citations in Watkins' grammar; they appear only after the verb 'find out' and after a few so-called auxiliary verbs. The *kutí* indicative complement occurs somewhat more extensively.

8. a. pafuna kutí ní·zífɛndá ní ɓa·nt<sup>h</sup>u.  
'they wish that I shall go about with people.'
- b. mɔzi·ɓa kutí watitúndu·ra  
'you know that he has accused us falsely.'

The word *kutí* follows all verbs expressing mental states. In both types of complement, there appears to be an additional characteristic: an implication that the speaker believes the complement clause to be true (if past in time) or highly likely (if set in the future). Thus, in Chewa, the indicative is an indication that

that the speaker of a sentence takes the complement to be true, while the use of the word kutí corresponds to an assertion about the subject of the sentence's mental processes.

Chewa subjunctive sentences support these conclusions.  
kutí subjunctive complements:

9. a. nifúna kutí musungá'né nikafa iné.  
'I hope that you protect each other (marry) when I am dead.'
- b. muniú·zé kutí nidzí·þé  
'you must tell me so that I may know'

again follow verbs of mental states, and also of saying. However, when the subjunctive is used in the lower clause the speaker does not convey any commitment to the truth, or probable truth of the complement clause. Bare subjunctives:

10. a. tíyeni mkákambé ku <sup>m</sup>p<sup>h</sup>ara kwá fúmu  
'let us go so that you can talk (defend yourselves) in the chief's court'
- b. tikutí tí'djé  
'we want to eat'.

not only carry no prediction of truth by the speaker, but also imply no prediction of the eventual truth of the complement by the subject of the sentence. (Although a particular outcome may be very much desired.) Note also that in the second example the verb root is tí, "want, say", this verb is never followed by the form kutí which looks like its infinitive.

Thus we see that in the selection of the proper complement type with an inflected verb form, two parameters are crucial. The first is the type of verb used in the main clause, and the second, the speaker's commitment to the truth or probability of the complement proposition.

Infinitival complements generally require that the subjects of the main clause and of the complement clause be identical.

11. a. þámíco'ni þádáyámbá kup<sup>h</sup>unzitsa þa'nt<sup>h</sup>u  
'The missionaries began to teach the people'
- b. maþá tikátémé bá'ngó kudzaruké vité'té  
'tomorrow we must go and cut reed(s) (with which) to make harvesting baskets'

(There are some minor exceptions to this rule which are of no concern here.) When the infinitive is used in the complement clause there is no overt subject in that clause. Thus we might postulate the operation of an Equi NP Deletion rule which works to delete the lower of two identical subjects, along with a rule specifying subjectless verbs as infinitives. Infinitives in complement clauses may be either indicative, as in (11a), or subjunctive, as in (11b). The indicative infinitive is used for events in the past, or for events in the near future, which are



presumably sure to come about. The subjunctive infinitive is used for events that are seen as distant in time or place, and hence nowhere near as sure to come about.

Thus we see that a similar set of principles is used to govern the choice of indicative versus subjunctive infinitives in complement clauses as was used to choose between indicative and subjunctive on inflected verbs in complements. There are some differences however. Although in both cases subjunctives represent the speaker's neutrality with respect to the event specified by the complement clause ever coming into being, in the case of the infinitive there is a clear implication that it is impossible to predict the event because it is set in some distant time or place over which neither the speaker nor the actors have any control. In the case of the inflected subjunctive this removal is not necessary, it is sufficient that the speaker wishes, for any reason, to express uncertainty about the outcome.

The indicative infinitive is used for past (realized) events and for events in the near future which the speaker is sure will come true. Thus the indicative infinitive indicates the same speaker attitude as the indicative on an inflected complement verb.

However, this is not the full picture. If it is the case that indicative infinitives meet exactly the criteria for indicative inflected verbs with the addition of identical subjects in the matrix and complement clauses, then there should be no indicative complements with identical subjects present in both clauses. They should always be replaced with infinitival complements. Yet the verb 'find out', *pəza*, always takes the bare indicative complement, even when the subjects of the main and complement clauses are identical (see sentence (3.a.ii)). Thus, another parameter must be at work in the formation of indicative infinitives. Unfortunately, I have not yet determined what the additional factor may be. Possibly, there must be an immediate relationship between the action of the main and embedded clauses; but I have not yet been able to work out such a concept to my own satisfaction.

Since subjunctive infinitives only occur with events at a remove from the action of the matrix clause, there are naturally cases of subjunctive inflected complements with the subjects of the matrix and complement clauses identical. These generally refer to events in the near future where the speaker is nonetheless unwilling or unable to predict realization. Thus, the rule forming infinitive complements must be sensitive not only to the presence of identical subjects in each clause, but also to the situational pragmatics of the sentence.

Thus, in Chewa, the choice of complementizer is controlled in part by the syntactic elements of the sentence, and in part by the pragmatics of its use. The choice between indicative and subjunctive indicates the speaker's beliefs about the truth (or eventual realization) of the complement clause. The form *kutí* is selected by a particular class of matrix verbs which indicate the mental activities of the subject of the higher clause. While the use of the infinitive requires the identity of matrix and complement subject as well as specific satisfaction of requirements of truth, decideability, and so on. Thus, a complex interaction



of meaning, lexical items, and speaker beliefs all go into the choice of complement type in Chewa.

#### 5. Kamba complementation patterns

Kamba has five complement patterns:

12. a. Bare Indicative
- b. kana Indicative
- c. Simple Subjunctive
- d. (Indicative) Infinitive
- e. Future Subjunctive

Thus it is clear that there must be some differences in the choice of complementizer in Kamba as compared to Chewa. Nonetheless, the rules governing complementizer choice in Kamba use similar criteria to those of Chewa, although the specific pairings of criterion and complementizer will often differ.

Indicative complements, with or without the introductory kana, only follow verbs of saying or mental activity. kana is used when the complement is a statement of fact, no introducer is used when the complement represents an intention or possible, but not certain, event. Thus compare:

13. maisye kana nĩ mĩtamanu  
     'they said that he was stupid.'
14. amanyĩsya maisye maimũmanyĩsya ingĩ  
     'the teachers said that they would not teach him anymore.'

In the first case, the complement represents a statement of fact on the part of the subject of the higher clause, while in the second case, it represents an intention on the part of the subject of the higher sentence. At the same time, it appears that speaker evaluation of the truth of the complement, or its probable realization if set in the future, also plays a part in deciding whether the introductory kana will be employed. Thus in the sentences given as (3.b.i) and (3.b.ii), repeated here:

3. b. i. aisye kana nũkũka ũmũnthi  
          'he said that he is coming today.'
- ii. anambĩie akandũmĩa ivuku  
          'he said that he would send me the book.'

we have two reported promises as to the future action of the reported complement sentence. However, it seems that we have a different attitude towards these promises on the part of the speakers of these sentences. In the first case, the speaker believes that the promise will be kept, while in the second case, the speaker only reports the promise, but does not express conviction that it will be kept. Thus, as in Chewa, the speaker attitude seems to affect the form of the complement clause.

The infinitive complement in Kamba, again as in Chewa, is only used when the subjects of the matrix and complement clauses

are identical. Thus, we might posit an Equi-NP deletion rule for Kamba too. Infinitival complements never follow the verbs which I have just described which take indicative complements. Thus, the posited Equi-NP rule must be sensitive to the matrix verb as well as to the subject NPs. The simple infinitive is used when the action of the complement is seen as true or following immediately on the action of the main clause thus:

15. syana niũthi kũthauka mũvi:la  
'the children are going to play football.'

In this sentence the children are seen as on their way to the game, and the playing is seen as certain to take place. When the complement is seen as not automatically following upon the action of the main verb, the subjunctive will be used. Thus:

16. nĩngũthi ngathooe mbũi  
'I'm going to buy a goat.'

In this case, the action of going is seen as not necessarily resulting in the purchase of the goat, perhaps none will be for sale today, or the buyer will not agree to the seller's price. Here the subjunctive is used on the complement verb, along with the future tense marker, *-ka-*, which indicates the distance between the action of the two verbs. If the buying of the goat were seen as certain, the sentence could be rendered:

17. a. nĩngũthi kũthooa mbũi  
'I'm going to buy a goat.'  
b. ngathooa mbũi.  
'I'm going to (gonna) buy a goat.'

In the first case, the need for travel to get the goat is explicitly indicated, while in the second case, only the futurity is indicated.

In addition to the future subjunctive mentioned above, the subjunctive is used in complements in Kamba whenever the conditions for indicative or infinitive complements as described above are not met. That is, after verbs other than those of speaking or mental activity whenever the conditions for neither the infinitive nor the future subjunctive are met. Thus, the subjunctive does not necessarily indicate the improbability of the action of the complement as it does in Chewa, as it must be used when the subjects of the two clauses differ after certain verbs:

18. wĩ:enda nambĩlilye wĩa ĩndĩĩ?  
'when do you want me to start work?'

is an example of a sentence where the action of the complement is expected to come about, but since the subjects of the two verbs, 'you' and 'I', are different, the subjunctive is employed.



Thus, the choice of complement types in Kamba, as in Chewa, is based on a complex of syntactic and pragmatic criteria. The indicative complements are only used with matrix verbs of speech or mental states, and no other complement types may follow these verbs. The infinitive is used when the matrix and complement sentences have identical subjects, and when the action of the two clauses are sufficiently closely related. The subjunctive is used in all other cases. Speaker evaluation of the truth of the complement is necessary not only for the use of the infinitive, but also for the kana indicative.

#### 6. Conclusions--Chewa and Kamba compared

If we compare the choice of complement type in Chewa and Kamba we find that there are extensive similarities in the criteria used for the selection of complementizers in both languages, just as there are extensive similarities in the morphology of the complementizer systems of these languages. However, the specific morphological forms governed by the specific set of criteria will often differ. Most importantly, in Chewa the use of the indicative complement depends on the speaker's evaluation while in Kamba it depends on the type of matrix verb. In Chewa the introductory word kuti is correlated with the same class of verbs which predict the indicative in Kamba; while the introductory word kana in Kamba is used only with the indicative class of verbs, but then indicates the same speaker attitude that predicted the indicative in Chewa. Thus, the same two parameters are used with skewed effect.

While both Kamba and Chewa are in essential agreement as to the use of the indicative infinitive complement type, they differ in that Chewa uses the infinitive with a subjunctive ending for distant events, while Kamba uses a future tense inflected subjunctive for these cases. In general, Kamba uses the finite subjunctive complement more widely than Chewa does. These various differences are schematized in Table 1.

Table 1. Comparison of complement systems: speaker evaluation

| matrix verb   | positive   | neutral   |
|---|--|---|
| 1. speech or mental state<br>Chewa:<br>Kamba:         | <u>kuti</u> indicative<br><u>kana</u> indicative | <u>kuti</u> subjunctive<br>bare indicative      |
| 2. other<br>a) subjects different<br>Chewa:<br>Kamba: | bare indicative<br>simple subjunctive            | bare subjunctive<br>simple subjunctive          |
| b) subjects same<br>i. direct<br>Chewa:<br>Kamba:     | indicative infinitive<br>infinitive              | bare subjunctive<br>simple subjunctive          |
| ii. distant<br>Chewa:<br>Kamba:                       | not applicable<br>not applicable                 | subjunctive<br>infinitive<br>future subjunctive |

Thus we see that in the detailed comparison of the identical constructions in two separate Bantu languages we may find that although the morphological forms employed in the construction are quite similar, and the factors governing the choice of morphological form are also similar, the specific meshing of syntactic, semantic and pragmatic factors with morphological forms may vary widely. From this we must conclude that an understanding of comparative Bantu grammar cannot be attained simply through the discovery of points of similarity or difference in the morphological systems of Bantu languages, but must also be based on a careful investigation of the ways in which superficially similar forms are actually used in each language.

#### Footnote

<sup>1</sup>The Chewa transcription is Watkins'; the Kamba is standard orthography.

#### References

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| English                      | Chewa                          | Kamba                          |
|------------------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| 1. I am going to the market  | 1. Ndiye ndiye<br>ndiye ndiye  | 1. Ndiye ndiye<br>ndiye ndiye  |
| 2. I am going to the market  | 2. Ndiye ndiye<br>ndiye ndiye  | 2. Ndiye ndiye<br>ndiye ndiye  |
| 3. I am going to the market  | 3. Ndiye ndiye<br>ndiye ndiye  | 3. Ndiye ndiye<br>ndiye ndiye  |
| 4. I am going to the market  | 4. Ndiye ndiye<br>ndiye ndiye  | 4. Ndiye ndiye<br>ndiye ndiye  |
| 5. I am going to the market  | 5. Ndiye ndiye<br>ndiye ndiye  | 5. Ndiye ndiye<br>ndiye ndiye  |
| 6. I am going to the market  | 6. Ndiye ndiye<br>ndiye ndiye  | 6. Ndiye ndiye<br>ndiye ndiye  |
| 7. I am going to the market  | 7. Ndiye ndiye<br>ndiye ndiye  | 7. Ndiye ndiye<br>ndiye ndiye  |
| 8. I am going to the market  | 8. Ndiye ndiye<br>ndiye ndiye  | 8. Ndiye ndiye<br>ndiye ndiye  |
| 9. I am going to the market  | 9. Ndiye ndiye<br>ndiye ndiye  | 9. Ndiye ndiye<br>ndiye ndiye  |
| 10. I am going to the market | 10. Ndiye ndiye<br>ndiye ndiye | 10. Ndiye ndiye<br>ndiye ndiye |